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By Dan Coffman

THE TEST BEGINS

Fire officer classes are being Beta tested for internet/hybrid delivery

Author's Notes: *Over the past couple of years, I have written a series of articles on changes that were proposed, developed and that are now being tested and implemented in the California Fire Service Training and Education System. This process has been facilitated by the California Fire Service Training and Education Strategic Plan known as "Blueprint 20\20".*

In this age of technology, students have become accustomed to receiving instruction and most everything else on the internet. In fact, the younger generation of firefighters, 30 years and younger, have been raised with the computer, internet, e-mail, Google, etc., and the more seasoned firefighters have been introduced to technology through its implementation in so much of what we do today in the fire service.

It is not surprising then that the question has been asked, more frequently as time passes, "Why can't the CFSTES classes be offered on-line?"

The answer is: That is certainly an option that should be explored. Thus, in early 2006, STEAC formed a committee to investigate that possibility. Today, after seeking input from all Fire Officer instructors and other stakeholders, the classes in the Fire Officer Series, except for I-300, are being beta tested for on-line\hybrid delivery. This article will focus on the current effort to beta test the Fire Officer Classes for internet\hybrid delivery and provide answers to questions that have been asked regarding the beta test and future delivery of CFSTES class on the internet.

Introduction

Among the changes that have been, or are currently being developed are the updating of the California Fire Officer Certification Training Standards. These standards were tied to the NFPA 1031 Fire Officer Standard for Fire Officer I-IV (Fire\Chief Officer). The CFTES Fire Officer and Chief Officer series are under review for courses that will required, course content in those courses, standard, off the shelf texts to be used, for improving currency of material taught, and finally, the possibility of delivering CFSTES Fire Officer classes in an On-line\Hybrid fashion. But first, the obvious question is:

What is an on-line\hybrid class delivery?

For purposes of this beta test, if a class is delivered on-line, that means it is taught completely on an internet platform such as Blackboard, WebCT, etc.. If a class is a hybrid, a portion of the course is presented on the internet, and the remainder is taught in a conventional classroom. For example, I teach Management 1 in a hybrid fashion. The first 32 hours are conducted on-line and a mandatory eight hour classroom session is scheduled following the internet instruction.

The CFSTES Fire Officer classes are being evaluated to determine if the current hours and content requirements are appropriate or need to be modified. When the beta test is completed at the end of the Spring 2008 semester, a report will be drafted by the Committee tasked with this assignment, with their recommendations for STEAC consideration, modification and adoption.

History

As stated above, current changes in California's Fire Service Training and Education are contained in "Blueprint 20\20": The California Fire Service Training and Education Strategic Plan. It i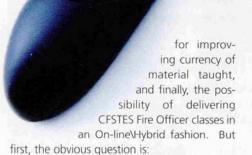s within that framework that the Fire Officer and Chief Officer Certification Training Standards have been updated, classes and curriculum are being modified, and the on-line\hybrid delivery of CFSTES Fire Officer classes are being beta tested.

At the STEAC meeting on March 24, 2006, a proposal was made to investigate the feasibility of presenting some of the classes, or portions of the classes, in the Fire Officer Series, in a distance learning format.

An ad-hoc committee of STEAC members was appointed, with David Senior as the Chair, joined by Dan Coffman, Mary Jennings and Mark Romer. This Committee was expanded to include additional members from the Training Officers and includes Rich Cabral, Mike Jennings and Tom Pambianco.

David Senior sent out a survey to all instructors of the Fire Officer classes with the course outlines and the following questions:
- Does the course outline meet the needs of the fire service today?
- What changes, if any, would you like to

see in the course outline and why?

- Have you ever taken a course online?
- Have you ever taught a course online?
- Based on your experience teaching this course, how much of this course could be taught online? Why?
- How much MUST be taught in the classroom, face - to - face? Why?

Although the response was smaller than desired, sixty respondents, the insights provided were useful.

The committee then took all the lesson plans, sought additional input from members of the various stakeholders, met twice, in Sacramento and Fresno, to discuss the various comments and review each class outline to determine which learning domains could be taught in a distance learning format, and those which must be taught in the classroom.

Be advised, while learning domains have been identified as compatible with a distance learning presentation, instructors will not be required to teach any class or portions thereof at a distance.

The Committee brought its findings and recommendations to the January 19, 2007 STEAC meeting. STEAC approved the concept of teaching the classes or portion of the classes in the Fire Officer Series on-line and authorized the Fire Technology Program at Allan Hancock College to conduct a beta test of the classes over a period of a year and bring the findings back to STEAC. The beta test began with the Management 1 class last June 2007, and Hancock College is currently offering the remaining classes.

The beta test will be complete in June 2008 and the findings brought back to the Adhoc Committee for evaluation and to develop the final report with findings and recommendations. While the ultimate outcome is unknown at this time, I expect that these classes will be approved, in some fashion, for on-line\hybrid delivery in the future, hopefully starting in late 2008 or early 2009.

What is the CFSTES Fire Officer On-Line and Hybrid Classes Beta Test?

With the exception of I-300, which has not been released for internet delivery, these classes are scheduled for on-line\hybrid delivery in the Spring 2008 Semester at Allan Hancock College.

Except for Fire Prevention 1A and 1B, which are delivered exclusively on the internet, these classes are delivered in a "Hybrid" (Classroom\Internet) fashion as shown in the table on this page. An attempt is being made to schedule in-class sessions, for courses taught concurrently on-line, in the same week. For example: The classroom sessions for Command 1A may be held on Monday\Tuesday followed by Command 1B Wednesday and Thursday. Students must contact the Instructor directly for times and locations.

These classes are fully accredited by the California State Fire Marshal. A CFSTES Course Completion Certificate will be awarded to all students that meet the requirements of each class. A breakdown on internet and classroom hours for each class is contained in the table below. Contact Dan Coffman at Dcoffman@hancockcollege.edu for a breakdown of the learning domains authorized for on-line instruction in each class.

Class	Classroom	Internet
I-300: Intermediate ICS	Not Online	Not Online
Fire Command 1A: Command Principles For Company Officers	16	24
Fire Command 1B: Incident Management For Company Officers	14	26
Fire Command 1C: I-Zone Fire Fighting For Company Officers	10.5	29.5
Fire Instructor 1A: Instructional Techniques, Part 1	24	16
Fire Instructor 1B: Instructional Techniques, Part 2	20	20
Fire Investigation 1A: Fire Origin & Cause Determination	14	26
Fire Management 1: Management/Supervision for Company Officers	8	32
Fire Prevention 1A: Introduction To The California Fire Code, Part 1	0	40
Fire Prevention 1B: Introduction To The California Fire Code, Part 2	0	40

How These Classes are Conducted: Online courses require students to have access to a computer with an individual e-mail account and access to the World Wide Web. The internet portion of these classes will be conducted on the Blackboard platform and, while there are some variations in location, the classroom portions are being held primarily at Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria.

Frequently Asked Questions

Questions not answered above

Course Management/ Development

- **What is the platform? Will the course be converted to other platforms?**

The courses for the beta test will be put into the Blackboard format. In the future, any instructor/college can change the format to fit the platform they are using.

- **Who/what will be the central repository of the developed courses.**

The basic beta test courses will be given to SFT and made available to any instructor that wishes to have a copy.

- **Who determines the locations of the mandatory class sessions?**

The instructor or the host community college or fire department.

- **Who monitors/validates their attendance?**

The on-line attendance is validated by course work completion by set dates, entries in threaded discussions and/or mandatory chat room work. Like any course taken the most important part of the course is student learning. If the student learns the required information, the amount of time they spent is immaterial whether longer or shorter. Most online classes are harder than courses held in a classroom.

- **How can you ensure the person taking the class is really the person who shows up for the classroom sessions?**

As in any course, the person that comes to class in middle of the course is expected to have the knowledge from the online portion of the course. A quiz at the beginning of the first classroom session covering the online material will ensure their knowledge and their ID will validate who they rare. This only one of several ways.

- **How many students will be able to attend online?**

The maximums for the on-line\hybrid courses are exactly the same as classroom courses.

Instructors

- **Can other instructors have the course syllabus and related materials to teach a course in their area?**

All the general information that is required to teach the class will be given out in the Blackboard platform. Just as in the information given by SFT for classroom presentations. The instructor will only need to add their own additional course material the same way they do with their classroom courses.

- **How are instructors trained to deliver SFT courses in this format?**

Community colleges have training sessions for their instructors based on the platform they use at that college. Most colleges require instructors to have this instruction before they are allowed to teach an online course. This instructor training is necessary to give the instructor the necessary tools to teach a good online class.

- **Will SFT develop and make available a Train the Trainer for instructors?**

CSFT is only allowing these courses to be taught in an online format if the instructor elects to teach in this format. The instructors will be responsible to meet the requirements of their institution or online provider.

Students

- **How are the students able to interact with other students/instructor?**

There are several ways this can happen, team projects, chat rooms, threaded discussions, and if a classroom portion is required, in class.

- **How will they complete assignments?**

They can be emailed or mail a hard copy, instructors choice. Some assignments may require filling out an online form or may answer discussions questions in a chat room. There are several options.

- **Do they use the same materials? How are they graded?**

The materials will be the same as the instructor uses in the classroom. The instructor grades the assignments and re-emails them back to the student or puts them in a self-addressed stamped envelope provided by the student and sends it back to the student.

Beta Test

- **Because this is a beta test, will the students receive credit from Allan Hancock? Will SFT recognize these courses as meeting the requirements for the Fire Officer Certification?**

Yes this is a college class and meets the same student learning outcomes as the classroom course. These Classes are Fully Accredited by the California State Fire Marshal. A CFSTES Course Completion Certificate will be awarded to all students that meet the requirements of each class.

- **How will SFT be able to distinguish between online delivery Beta test and classroom delivery at another host agency?**

The question really is "do the students have the required knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) at the end of the online\hybrid class?" This is tested by exam at the end of the course. The SFT Fire Officer Certification courses are driven by the students obtaining the KSAs and proving their mastery by an evaluation process. If there are the same exit skill requirements then there should be no need to differentiate between classes.

Evaluation

- **What is the evaluation process for the course, instructor and overall learning experience?**

During the beta test there is an evaluation filled out by each student. The instructor also evaluates the course and effectiveness of the learning domains taught online.

- **Will students be asked for their evaluation/input of the online methodology?**

Yes

- **What evaluation process will measure and compare the success/failure of students compared to standard delivery methods?**

Presently the evaluation is of the course and the applicability of online instruction for the allowed learning domains. What we do know is that online instruction is not for everyone. Students inexperienced with online courses do not realize the difficulty of the course and understand they must be self-disciplined enough to complete projects ontime.

Conclusion

As the saying goes, "You Are Either Moving Ahead or Falling Back". I am pleased to announce that the California Fire Service Training and Education System is moving ahead on improving the system and delivery of courses to improve the professionalization of the fire service.

The beta test currently being conducted on the internet\hybrid delivery of the Fire Officer courses is one initiative that will result in an improvement in the delivery of the CFSTES classes.

If you would like additional information on this or other issues related to Fire Service Training and Education, or have questions to add to the FAQ's, contact Dan Coffman at: dcoffman@hancockcollege.edu

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chief Dan Coffman has worked in government for over three decades. He was an Infantry\Medic during the Viet Nam conflict, and has been a member of the Fire Service since 1974. He served with the Miramar, Los Angeles County and Chino Valley Fire Departments holding the ranks of Firefighter\Paramedic to Chief Officer. He is currently a college\university professor teaching fire technology and administration classes.
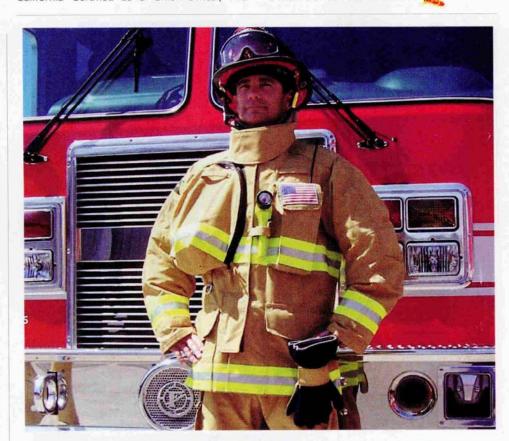
He served two decades as a Member and Vice Chairman of California's State Board of Fire Services, and was the elected President of both the Los Angeles County and California State Firefighters' Associations.

In addition, Chief Coffman currently serves as President of the California Fire Technology Directors Association, as a FEMA Region IX Representative on the "Fire & Emergency Services Higher Education Conference", serves as a member of the California Statewide Training and Education Advisory Committee (STEAC), and in numerous other capacities.

Chief Coffman is a published author, was a Licensed Paramedic for 25 years, and is California Certified as a Chief Officer, Fire Officer, Firefighter, Fire Prevention Officer, Public Education Officer and Fire Instructor. Has an Associate of Science Degree in Fire Technology, a Bachelor of Science Degree in Fire Protection Administration, and a Master of Science Degree in Public Administration.

As President of the "Fire Education Company" and "Daniel P. Coffman Associates" he provides instruction and advice on education and emergency services.

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